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What is Generosity?

In a class exercise, David King asked us to stop and consider the generous people we've encountered in our lives. When we did so, financial giving was perhaps part of their story, but just as likely to surface were other forms of generosity. People might be generous by sharing their time, skills, knowledge, or even their gift of listening well and asking good questions.

When we address generous giving in our congregations, it's important not to limit our imagination of those so-called "generous givers" as those who give the highest dollar amounts. Generous giving takes many forms. Plus, when it does come to financial giving, let's not forget members who depend on relatively small incomes streams, but who give a large portion of those financial resources to ministry. These generous folk may not show up on our list of "top ten givers," but surely we should describe them as generous.

In the book [*The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose*](#), Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson describe generosity this way:

"Generosity is the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly. It is a learned character trait that involves attitude and action entailing both the inclination and actual practice of giving liberally. It is not a haphazard behavior but a basic orientation to life..."

Smith and Davidson's work suggests generosity may be measured by looking at financial giving, *and also*...volunteering, relational giving (social connections), neighborly generosity (care and hospitality toward one's neighbors), and self-evaluated generosity. In other words, like all stewardship, generosity is holistic. It includes financial giving, but cannot be limited to money.

When I think of the people in my life I've experienced as particularly generous, I recall:

- The generosity of confirmation mentors who gave of their time, and shared their wisdom, with high school youth in my congregation growing up.
- The generosity of my internship congregation's newsletter folding team who every month, without fail, folded hundreds of newsletters to be mailed to members of the congregation.

- The generosity of a friend who developed a pen pal relationship with an inmate on death row.
- The generosity of a neighbor who mowed my lawn, just because.
- The generosity of donors who funded my seminary education.

Like all virtues, generosity can be learned. And, like all spiritual practices, generosity takes, well, *practice*. With practice, in response to God's generous grace, we can succeed in becoming more generous ourselves.

As you seek to follow God this week, look particularly for those times and places where you see generosity. Notice generosity—in all its incarnations. Give thanks for generosity. Tell others when you see it. And, with in a prayerful spirit, respond in kind.